

CSREES Portfolio Review Expert Panel Report Summary

Portfolio 4 – Nutrition: Portfolios 4.1 and 4.2 CY 2000 – 2004

SUMMARY

External Review Completed: February 2006

Portfolio Description

The Goal 4 Nutrition Portfolios reflect research supported by CSREES to generate knowledge about food and nutrition and the transfer of that knowledge through education and extension, to help the American population adopt a diet and physical activity pattern that promotes a HealthierUS. Supporting CSREES Strategic Goal 4, “Improve the Nation’s Nutrition and Health,” the Nutrition Portfolio consists of Portfolio 4.1, supporting Objective 4.1, “Improve Human Health by Better Understanding the Nutrient Requirements of Individuals and Nutritional Value of Foods,” and Portfolio 4.2, supporting Objective 4.2, “Promote Healthier Food Choices and Lifestyles.” Because these two objectives are so closely integrated, and it is very important that they be integrated, Portfolios 4.1 and 4.2 were discussed together in the self-study report and were scored as the Goal 4 Nutrition Portfolio.

Summary of Recommendations

The Nutrition Unit and its leaders demonstrated sincere efforts to improve the nation’s nutrition and health. The oral presentations by the NPLs were of quality and the time and effort they invested in preparing the self-review document and evidentiary materials were commendable. The portfolio accomplishments are especially noteworthy given the limited resources and a varied mix of expectations and requirements for specific programs. The units’ work is vitally important to improving the quality of the U.S. food supply and promoting healthful food, nutrition and activity choices for all Americans. The panel acknowledges that there are many challenges and barriers to achieving these objectives.

The mixing of “food,” “nutrition,” and “fitness” concepts in the accomplishment reports is sometimes confusing and is not consistently matched to the Goal 4 mission. The nutrition work is presented as part of the agency’s expertise covering the breadth of the nation’s food system, but the food system aspects of nutrition are not uniformly represented. Physical activity is mentioned in the priority statements, but not measured and reported in the data. These inconsistencies need to be rectified and presented more clearly and more uniformly in subsequent reviews.

The panel recommends the higher education resources of CSREES be directed to developing a cadre of well-trained scientists. Expertise in diversity and the social science aspects of food science and nutrition should be especially encouraged and efforts should be continued and strengthened to attract talented youth from underrepresented minorities. Additionally, there is a growing need for nutritionists trained in biological sciences.

Staff members at CSREES are professional and dedicated to their work, but descriptions of accomplishments do not consistently clarify how NPL leadership roles and leadership activities contributed to or promoted successful work of program partners. If CSREES wants to maintain and maximize its ability to be a dynamic organization, the agency should examine options that would allow flexibility in providing program leadership. Also, a variety of models and alternatives should be explored so that more leadership and integrated research, education and extension activities in this important area can be provided.

Relevance

Scope: This portfolio reflects CSREES' strength in taking a comprehensive approach towards promoting health and well-being of individuals, families and communities. The panel recommends that the food and nutrition needs of older adults be addressed with more emphasis even considering resource limitations. In addition, further efforts are needed to clarify the relationships which exist among base programs, initiatives, and targeted programs in extension/outreach, especially in the context of optimal integration of research, education and extension components.

Focus: The panel rates the portfolio as highly focused and reflecting an appropriate mix of efforts to address important needs. However, the panel recommends more extensive coordination as the agency tries to allocate resources to address important issues, topics and critical needs. The panel also advises the agency to continue to prioritize its efforts while remaining flexible and responsive to dynamic food, nutrition and health issues.

Contemporary and/or Emerging Issues: The portfolio has identified over time many contemporary and emerging food and nutrition issues. The panel recommends that future directions be prioritized and focused to further enhance research, education, and extension integration. The panel believes that the agency should renew/strengthen energy and commitment to better prepare to adapt to emerged contemporary issues.

Integration: The F4HN unit emphasizes integration of education, research, and extension across CSREES and this emphasis should continue. However, the panel rates the portfolio as moderately integrated and strongly recommends enhanced and measurable efforts to translate research results for use in education and extension.

Multi-disciplinary Balance: The portfolio has made significant progress in incorporating multidisciplinary approaches. However, the portfolio remains moderately balanced and should initiate multi-disciplinary work throughout.

Quality

Significance of Findings: The panel acknowledges that NRI and other CSREES-sponsored research programs have yielded an impressive number of publications in a breadth of high-quality peer-reviewed journals, and significant findings have been shared with professional colleagues.

Stakeholder/Constituent Inputs: The panel believes that the portfolio demonstrated generation of many stakeholder and constituent inputs. However, on the formula side, input from states are not routinely used in setting or adjusting program directions.

Alignment with Current State of Science: The panel rates the panel as, highly aligned with the current state of science.

Appropriate and/or Cutting Edge Methodology: The panel assesses that the portfolio also provided evidence that appropriate methodology is routinely utilized, and the F4HN unit appears to be ahead of other agency units in utilizing logic models to plan and report.

Performance

Portfolio Productivity: The panel rates the portfolio as moderately productive due to the fact that evidence of staff leadership is not compelling in all program areas although the agency's contributions to the documented outcomes of research activities are well documented.

Portfolio Comprehensiveness: The portfolio demonstrates a moderate level of comprehensiveness. The panel acknowledges, however, that the agency and the unit are making efforts to utilize a consistent reporting system based on the logic model. Nevertheless, it

encourages the portfolio to develop a prospective and comprehensive model for its work, with programmatic logic models nested within.

Portfolio Timeliness: The portfolio demonstrates that most projects achieved closure on time. However, the panel recommends that the agency continue to work with its partners and key stakeholders to improve its ability to collect important outcomes data.

Agency Guidance: The panel rates the portfolio as having exceptional agency guidance. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the agency examine options to strengthen emphasis on integration. The panel notes CSREES' relatively new partnership arrangement with Baylor as an innovative and potentially productive way of coordinating expertise and communication on maternal and child health.

Portfolio Accountability: The panel rates the portfolio as having moderate level of accountability, and notes that this self-study report has limited information on the outcomes of formula-funded activities. The panel recommends that the agency continue and expand its efforts to review POWs and reports for nutrition-related activities to capture evidence of impact of formula funds.

Comments on Future Directions

The portfolio presents an extensive collection of future direction statements that need to be prioritized and utilized for planning and resource allocation at the agency level.

Information Exchange

CSREES is encouraged to continue marketing and communicating its accomplishments. F4HN staff should participate on interdepartmental coordinating committees to enhance the visibility of and appreciation for CSREES' role and accomplishments. The agency is encouraged to continue to stay abreast of new research and national trends, especially in the dynamic area of obesity prevention where new research findings are changing prevention and treatment paradigms.

Data Issues

Data and information for formula-funded activities have weak support in the self-review document. At the present time, the POW system is being strengthened but, historically, the capturing of accomplishments has been difficult. Following the overall logic model for Goal 4, data collection in each activity area (Research, Education, and Extension) should ultimately report accomplishments in ways that more effectively capture overall impacts. Similarly, EFNEP is encouraged to continue moving forward with its plans to collect data that reflects accomplishments at the community and policy levels in addition to individual behaviors.

Evaluation Issues

The self-review document reflects varied components which make it difficult to specify a series of fair and representative overall ratings. Further, there were several issues impacting the effectiveness of the tool and adding to the complexity of the charge to the panel. The descriptions of the dimensions overlap on several occasions; the requirement that the panel come to a consensus despite being given only three possible scores. Adopting a 5-point scale will make it possible to award more meaningful scores. Also, inconsistent wording in the definitions of what each of the existing three points in the scale mean makes it difficult to arrive at a fair representation of the panel's views of the portfolio's strengths and weaknesses. These should be addressed by the time the next cycle of portfolio reviews occur. An improved rating tool will lead to a better, more useful final report.

Miscellaneous Comments on Evaluation Issues

Access to information on the results of budgeting and allocation of other resources is inconsistent throughout the self-review document. For the next cycle, the panel recommends an increased emphasis on consistency.

Portfolio Score = 86